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SUBJECT: As Belgian Cabinet Formation Hits Snag, Former PM Dehaene, "Mr. Fix-it," Called in to Clean up the Mess

Here he comes again

¶1. On July 5, Belgian King Albert II tasked former Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene, a Flemish Christian Democrat (CD&V), with a delicate mission ? finding a way to form a government that can implement constitutional reform in a way that is acceptable to the Flemish voters who want change and the francophones who do not. Dehaene's duties also include helping to create the conditions in which Flemish and francophone Christian Democrats and Liberals can together agree to form a government. Assuming Dehaene can manage to achieve these tasks, the hard work of fashioning a coalition accord could probably begin by the end of July/early August under the leadership of Flemish Christian Democratic leader Yves Leterme.

A very cautious informateur

¶2. Dehaene is the second man King Albert has asked to create the conditions for launching coalition talks. Immediately after the June 10 general elections, the King assigned the job of "informateur" to Didier Reynders, the current Finance Minister and leader of the Francophone Liberals (MR). Reynders spent three weeks meeting with a host of interlocutors before producing a voluminous inventory of the state of Belgium. He gave this Walloon-flavored Domesday Book to the King on July 4, all the while making clear that he wanted to see an "orange-blue" coalition of Christian Democrats and Liberals that concentrated on pocketbook issues, not the institutional matters of concern to a large minority of Flemish voters.

Too early for Leterme

¶3. While Reynders was conducting his fact-finding mission, it became clear to most Belgian political observers that it was too early to task Leterme, the CD&V leader whose party has the most seats in the lower house of parliament, with the burden of forming a cabinet. While all political party leaders, winners and losers of election, agreed that was Leterme's task and prerogative to form a government, he required either a consensus or, at this stage at least, the possibility of a consensus before he could begin to build a coalition. If he were to try to do so and fail, a political crisis would inevitably have ensued.

Such a crisis would have derived from the harsh mathematical realities of the election. A government without Christian Democratic participation would be too weak even to contemplate constitutional reform, a job requiring a two-thirds majority in the 150 member lower house of parliament.

A "bully" who can fix things

¶4. The present delicate situation thus seemed to many Belgian observers as being tailor made for Jean-Luc Dehaene's peculiar political gifts. Acting in various capacities, he has been the key negotiator in the constitutional processes responsible for transforming Belgium from a unitary into a federal state. In sharp contrast to Reynders, Dehaene, who likes to cultivate a man of the people image, prefers to operate informally and out of sight of the cameras. In the past he has had such a formidable network of colleagues and accomplices that he could produce deals that, whatever their faults in terms of "political beauty" (his phrase), had the advantage of being workable.

(Comment: The European Constitutional treaty of 2002 is the obvious exception to this general observation. Dehaene served as vice-chairman of the "European Convention" that drafted the now defunct agreement. End Comment)

Win over Francophone reticence

¶5. Comment: Dehaene's biggest job is winning support

for constitutional reform from the francophone leaders, many of whom served in his government during the years of his premiership between 1993 and 1999. Francophone leaders like Reynders and Joelle Milquet, president of the Francophone Christian Democratic CDH, fear being dragged into endless institutional discussions and complicated deals that will not work and which expose them to harsh opposition from within the French-speaking community. They hope Dehaene can demonstrate to his own party rank-and-file that institutional reform is not in the offing without causing a between CD&V and N-VA, its small Flemish nationalist ally. N-VA party leader Bart De Wever is adamant that his party will not join a government that has no institutional reform platform. And without the N-VA, Liberals and Christian Democrats would barely have enough votes in Parliament to keep a government going. Although no one seems to be in favor of it, no doubt Dehaene will also explore the possibility of forming a grand coalition of the two Christian Democratic, two Socialist and two Liberals parties. Such a large coalition would of course have the two-thirds in Parliament to amend the Constitution.

¶6. Dehaene told the press that he will not be pinned down on a timetable, adding that he wished to have a formateur (Leterme) in place by Belgium's national day, July 21. That leaves a mere two weeks to find a road out of Belgium's political quagmire. Of course, Dehaene's mission is not limited to institutional matters; he will also have to find points of agreement on budgetary and social matters. Unpopular austerity measures appear to be looming, and agreeing on these measures may prove even more difficult than dealing with the institutional agenda. End Comment

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